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ABSTRACT

Mercy College (Ohio) has expanded its services for at-risk students, due to the fact that many of these students are not functioning at college level in writing, math, and reading. The hope of attaining a college education among at-risk students is high, and it is important that they receive help in their areas of need. To help accomplish this goal, Mercy initiated the Remedial Education Addressing Collegiate Hurdles (REACH) faculty-guided mentoring program. Structured sessions between at-risk students and faculty mentors help students adjust to academics and to provide the nourishment of a learning community. Project objectives are to implement the program in the student's first year of college, generate qualitative data to assess the value of intensive mentoring as perceived by both students and mentors, and examine the impact of mentoring with overall adjustment to college environment. Students are able to get tutoring and support services, have access to computer programs that help increase deficits in specific academic areas, and are able to utilize the Student Success Center (for academic, social, spiritual, and personal growth). Grant funds will be utilized for providing professional development and training of the faculty mentors, purchasing journaling software, and assessing the influence an intensive faculty-guided mentoring program has on the college adjustment of REACH participants. (Contains 13 references.) (CJW)

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The Influence of an Intensive Faculty-Guided Mentoring Program on the College Adjustment of At-Risk Students: A Qualitative Assessment

A Funded Grant Submitted to the Ohio Association of Developmental Educators

Prepared By:

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Need for Project

In the past three years, the college has seen a marked increase in students who test at the developmental range (i.e. not performing at college level) in writing, reading and mathematics. Since 1996 fifty-one (51) students tested in the developmental range on two or more of the above subjects. This compares to sixteen (16) students who tested in the developmental range on two or more of the subject areas from 1993-1996. These at-risk students are offered hopes of achieving a college education which in many instances is beyond their current potential or ability level. The challenge is to respond to the educational opportunities, or lack of skills which prohibit their success at the college level. The college cannot teach all applicants everything they need to know to be successful; however, it can be compassionate and fair in providing an opportunity for them to reacquaint themselves with basic skills or by exposing them to academic culture. One possible solution to this dilemma is to offer a developmental track to these students who must then pass this program proficiently before being admitted to any degree program at the college. Developmental education provides these students with courses that not only meet their current skill level requirement, but also permit the time necessary to achieve the demanded proficiency. Because of this identified need, the college established and implemented the REACH program (Remedial Education Addressing Collegiate Hurdles) Fall Semester 1999. A component of that program is an intensive faculty-guided mentoring program.

The purpose of this project is to assess the value of a multifaceted and intensive faculty-guided mentoring relationship on the adjustment of students in an academic support program. The focus of the proposed study is to examine the value of extending the traditional mentoring relationship in two significant ways, each intended to make this relationship a more intensive and powerful one. The first way involves the use of dialogue journals as a means of providing for more substantive and personal contact between mentor and mentee. The process of journaling has long been recognized as a means of promoting personal development and offering therapeutic benefits to the writer (Adams, 1990; Baldwin, 1992; Pennebaker, 1997; Progoff, 1975). Moreover, an impressive theoretical and empirical literature has documented the effectiveness of dialogue journals in a variety of contexts, especially related to the development of writing and critical thinking skills (e.g., Hughes, 1997), and self reflections associated with the preservice training of teachers and other professionals (e.g., Evans, 1994; Holten & Brinton, 1995). Considerably less appears to be written, however, about the use of such journals explicitly to promote and extend relationships between mentors and mentees when the content of such journals focuses on affective and/or psychological themes. By adding this dimension to the mentoring process, the college hopes to address the following important questions:

- How can such a dialogic relationship provide for a deepening of the mentor's understanding of the person of the mentee?
- How might dialogue journals provide self-reflection among mentors in ways that enhance their performance in this role?
- Are developmental shifts evident in the willingness of mentees to both self-disclose and reflect on concerns of relevance to their college adjustment as this dialogic relationship develops?
- In what ways does the use of such journals contribute to the student's overall adjustment to the college environment?

The second strategy for deepening the mentoring relationship involves an extension of the one-to-one nature of this relationship to the development of learning communities through the engendering of peer support. The contributions of social support to an individual's well being is well documented in the literature (see for example Vaux, 1990), and the role of such support as an important variable in the adjustment of college students in general, and at-risk students in particular has also been explored (e.g., Hertel, 1997; Giddan, 1988; Veroff, 1997; Wood, 1995; Zea , Jarama, & Bianchi, 1995). In the model proposed herein, the mentors provide opportunities for their mentees to come together in small groups and to meet with other mentor-mentee groups. In this role, the mentor actively facilitates opportunties for social exchange and relationship building through a series of both structured group development strategies and the support of more spontaneous interactions. Questions of importance in examining the value of this component of the mentoring process include:

- What behaviors and methods on the part of mentors are most effective in facilitating communication among their mentees in ways that create opportunities for meaningful interaction and social support?
- In what ways does the development of peer communities of mentees contribute to "a sense of place" in the institution for these at-risk learners?
- What is the contribution of such peer communities to the overall adjustment of these developmental students?

Project Objectives

Consistent with the perspective stated above, the following objectives for this project have been identified:

- To develop and implement an intensive mentoring program for REACH students during their first academic year at the college
- To generate qualitative data that will permit an assessment of the value of intensive mentoring as perceived by REACH students ***and*** REACH mentors
- To examine the impact of the mentoring component of the REACH program on the overall adjustment of students to the college environment

Project Description

The REACH program is designed for students who are deficient or struggling, in multiple skill areas based on the results of a placement testing and previous academic work. The REACH program provides three, three-credit classes in Basic Reading, Basic Writing and Basic Mathematics. A two-credit course in Student Success Strategies and a one-credit Keyboard course are also required of REACH participants. The REACH program will be offered twice a year and is limited to ten (10) students. A $76,800 grant was secured from the Stranahan Foundation to underwrite the costs of operating the REACH program for one academic year.

In addition to these courses, tutoring services and other academic support services would be available to students in this program. A dedicated computer lab offering tutorial services in mathematics, writing and general academic skills has been developed as part of this program. Students have access to interactive computer programs to help develop skills in these areas. Course faculty members are also available for tutoring. These services provide individualized and self-paced instructional activities and opportunities outside the classroom setting for REACH participants.

Students in the REACH program are also able to utilize the many services offered through the college's Student Success Center. The Student Success Center was established in April of 1998 for the purpose of providing the necessary services for students to be successful in their college endeavors. Services offered through the center provide opportunities for academic, social, personal and spiritual growth. Some of the services offered at the center are skill development in such areas as time management, stress management, and study habits; counseling referrals; individual and group tutoring for academic subject areas; and assistance for students with diagnosed learning disabilities. The center is administered by a coordinator who has a Ph.D. in Psychology. Services provided through the center have been funded, in part, by grants from the St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center Auxiliary and the St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center Foundation.

The final component of this program for REACH participants is a faculty-guided mentoring program. The faculty in the General Education Division of the college would serve as mentors to REACH students. The mentoring component of the REACH program would consist of structured sessions, dialogue journals and developing a peer learning community.

The first component (Structured Sessions) of this model of mentoring may be described as focusing primarily on **cognitive and behavioral** aspects of the students' adjustment. Mentors will schedule five (5) semi-structured sessions with students in which they assist with and support students in the processes of

goal setting, time management, identification and use of relevant campus resources, and on-going assessment of academic progress. It is suggested that the mentoring sessions will consist of the following items.

- **Session 1 – Semester Plan.** This session is to occur within the first two weeks. Mentors will review syllabi for all classes and assist the student in developing an initial plan for meeting course requirements. This session is also a good time to review some basic principles of time management.
- **Session 2 – Academic Assistance.** This session is to occur around week three (3) or four (4) of the semester. It involves having the student evaluate his/her progress in courses and identify any campus resources necessary to meet the student's needs.
- **Session 3 – Midterm Conference.** This session is to be held following midterm grades. Mentors will assist the student in developing a plan for addressing any problems.
- **Session 4 – Midterm Follow-up Conference.** This session is to occur approximately three (3) weeks after the midterm conference. The faculty mentor will assess progress made in addressing issues indentified during the midterm conference. Additional strategies/support activities will be suggested to the student as appropriate.
- **Session 5 – End-Of-Term Conference.** In this session, the student's overall progress for the semester will be discussed. The student will also be required to complete a *REACH Program Evaluation* form.

The second component of the mentoring is Dialogue Journals. The purpose of Dialogue Journals is to:

- Enhance the relationship between students and mentors,
- Allow for self-reflection on the part of both students and mentors,
- Encourage the writing process among program participants, and
- Provide data that will permit the qualitative assessment of students' adjustment to the college community.

This activity is designed to address the **affective** dimension of the students' adjustment. Through the use of a series of guide prompts, as well as opportunities for unstructured responding, students will engage in an ongoing dialogue with their mentors throughout the semester. In this way, they will be encouraged to reflect on and examine their feelings, fears, hopes, aspirations, etc. regarding their entry into post-secondary education in general, and their chosen degree program at the college in particular. The software package, *Student eJournal*, would be purchased with grant funds. (Complete information on this software has been included with this prospectus.)

The final component of the mentoring program is the Peer Learning Community. The purpose of the Peer Learning Community is to:

- Engender a sense of group spirit among REACH program participants,
- Help student recognize the value of social support, both as giver and receiver, and
- Support the concept of a learning community (all members share in the responsibility for learning).

This activity guided by the faculty mentors addresses the **social** aspect of the student's adjustment. Here, the focus will be on the development of supportive and collegial relationships with other students in the REACH program, as well as opportunities to develop relationships with other college students. This will be achieved through interactions both in the classroom and through co-curricular activities.

Staffing

As mentioned earlier in this document, the faculty members of the General Education Division of the college will serve as mentors. There are four (4) full-time faculty members in this division. They will be responsible for mentoring the ten (10) students enrolled in the REACH program. Coordination of the mentoring component of the REACH program will come under the direction of the Director of General Education and the Instructor in English. (The complete professional vitae of these two individuals has been included with this prospectus.)

The Director of General Education will be responsible for the overall coordination of the REACH program including the mentoring component. Mentoring training sessions have been held with the General Education faculty. During this session, expectations were identified. Follow-up training and addressing

any issues involving the mentoring component will be discussed at the regular General Education Division meetings.

The Instructor in English will be responsible for coordinating the Dialogue Journal component of the mentoring program. She is responsible for working with the faculty mentors in successfully completing this component of the program. Any necessary training for conducting the Dialogue Journal activity will be done during the General Education Division meetings.

Funding Needs

A grant in the amount of $1,500 from the Ohio Association for Developmental Education (OADE) for the purpose of underwriting the cost of implementing the mentoring component of the REACH program. Grant funds will be utilized for providing professional development and training of the faculty mentors; purchasing journaling software; and assessing the influence an intensive faculty guided mentoring program has on the college adjustment of REACH participants.

Budget Breakdown

Professional Development and Training		
Conference Attendance		$200
Journal Subscriptions		$200
In-House Training		$400
Journaling Software		$500
Research/Assessment Activities		$200
	TOTAL	$1,500

Results/Findings

While data related to the participants' academic performance will be gathered and assessed as part of the overall evaluation plan for the REACH program, the purpose of the proposed research is to focus on non-academic variables through the use of primarily qualitative methodologies that will help to explicate the contributions of the mentoring process to the adjustment of these students. Such methods will include content analyses of the journal entries of both mentor and mentee, as well as the analysis of participant responses to both qualitative and quantitative assessments completed during the developmental semester and follow-up data collections points during the students' years at this college.

It is hoped that at the end of this project, the qualitative assessment will show that this intensive, faculty-guided mentoring program had a positive influence on the adjustment of at-risk students to college and doing college level work. The results/findings of this project will be shared at the 2000 OADE conference. It is also anticipated that results will be shared through a paper developed from this project as well as an article in the association's newsletter. These vehicles for communicating the results/findings will share if the project objectives were achieved.

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